DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 761 FL 023 832

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TITLE	Foreign Language Exploratory Programs: Introduction to Language Learning. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-FL-96-08
PUB DATE	Jun 96
CONTRACT	RR93002010
NOTE	4p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC/CLL, 1118 22nd Street N.W., Washington, DC 20037.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cultural Awareness; Educational Objectives; Educational Trends; Elementary Education; Information Sources; *Introductory Courses; Models; Program Descriptions; Program Design; *Second Language Learning; *Second Language Programs; Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; *Foreign Language Experience Programs; Lovett School GA; Prince Georges County Public Schools MD; Provo City School District UT; Twin Falls School District 411 ID

ABSTRACT

Foreign Language Exploratory or Foreign Language Experience (FLEX) programs offer one approach to initiating foreign language instruction for children. One survey reported that 41 percent of United States elementary schools offering language instruction had FLEX programs. Statistics on FLEX programs in middle schools are unavailable. Most FLEX programs aim simply to give students a foundation for foreign language study, and may help students decide which language to study later and boost school system language enrollment. Cultural awareness is often included. Programs offer frequent, regular classes in a short period or short, less regular classes over a longer period, and are usually not part of a sequence. Courses may be taught by itinerant language teachers or regular classroom teachers. Four broad FLEX program types include general language courses teaching basic linguistic concepts, language potpourri or world language study courses sampling different languages, single language offerings with limited introductory exposure, and a combination of general and language potpourri offerings. Four program models include those of the Provo City (Utah) School District, Twin Falls (Idaho) School District 411, Prince George's County School District (Maryland), and Lovett School (Atlanta, Georgia). Information sources and a list of additional resources are provided. Contains six references and eight resources. (MSE)

ED 399 761

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By Kathleen Marcos

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Digest

June 1996

(EDO-FL-96-08)

Foreign Language Exploratory Programs: Introduction to Language Learning

Kathleen Marcos, ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics

Foreign Language Exploratory or Foreign Language Experience (FLEX) programs offer one approach to initiating foreign language instruction for children. Many of these programs are currently underway in U.S. schools. While it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of FLEX programs in existence, a survey conducted by the Center for Applied Linguistics (Rhodes & Oxford, 1988) reported that 41% of U.S. elementary schools offering foreign language instruction had FLEX programs. Statistics on the number of middle schools offering FLEX programs are unavailable.

What Is FLEX?

Most FLEX programs aim to give students a foundation for foreign language study; some programs introduce basic phrases in a number of languages in order to sharpen listening skills and familiarize students with the notion that thoughts can be expressed in another language. These programs often help students to decide which language to study in later grades. They may also serve to boost language enrollment in a school system. FLEX courses frequently offer cultural information that can help students develop an appreciation of other societies and customs. In some cases, the primary focus is on world cultures; these programs are usually incorporated into the social studies curriculum.

Included in the elementary or middle school curriculum, FLEX programs are conducted with frequent, regular classes in a short time frame or with short, less regular classes over a longer time period. Programs are usually not part of an articulated sequence (Met & Rhodes, 1990), although they may be taught in preparation for sequential courses. A small percentage of teaching time (1-5% per week) is dedicated to a typical FLEX program, with the time spent exploring one or more languages or presenting information about language itself. Instruction is often given in English (Curtain & Pesola, 1994). FLEX courses may be taught by itinerant language teachers or regular classroom teachers. Language proficiency and teacher certification vary according to program goals and state certification requirements.

Students should not expect to achieve fluency in a language at the end of a FLEX course. It is important that both students and parents are clear on this point. According to Lipton (1992), "FLEX is primarily a language/culture/motivational program."

Program Types

The broad classifications of programs outlined below are suggested by Curtain and Pesola (1994). A fourth type, the *Combination* course, may contain elements of both general language and language potpourri offerings. Usefulness of foreign languages in the work world and careers in languages may also be discussed.

• *General language* courses teach basic linguistic concepts such as the existence of language families (e.g., Romance, Germanic) and their relationships to one another. They may examine artificial languages, such as Esperanto, computer languages, or Morse code, or explore non-spoken languages, such as signed languages. There may be discussion of the modern and classical languages available for later study in the school system. A common objective of these programs is to educate students about general language principles in order to facilitate future foreign language learning. Proficiency in a foreign language is not a goal. Such programs may be approached as part of the language arts curriculum.

•*Language potpourri* or *world language study* courses are sampler programs allocating a limited number of classes to each of several languages. Thus, three weeks could be spent learning selected basic aspects of Spanish and a few phrases in that language, while the next three weeks could be spent on French and the last three on German. Some schools use the opportunity to introduce Latin or Greek. The purpose of these programs is similar to that of the general language course; in addition, they may help students decide which language to study in later grades. Students learn phrases in various languages but do not attain any degree of proficiency. Kennedy and De Lorenzo (1985) refer to this program type as *trial language study*.

•*Single language offering*. This option provides limited introductory exposure to one language that students may later be able to choose for further study. In general, limited or no proficiency in the language should be expected. Lipton (1995) reports that some proficiency may be attained with a once- or twice-a-week program that emphasizes functional language and cultural awareness.

Four Models

Provo City Schools (Utah). As part of the middle school exploratory curriculum, a combination FLEX program was initiated at Grades 7 and 8 to increase interest in languages and to allow students a view of *how* to learn a language before studying one. The program offered three-week segments on French, German, Spanish, and Russian; two weeks on Japanese; segments on cultural geography and cultural issues and language histories and patterns; and one- to three-day modules on Arabic, Chinese, Italian, Portuguese, Finnish, Navajo, and Swahili. French, German, Spanish, Russian, and Japanese were chosen because they are offered for sequential study in the school district. Other languages were chosen because introductory materials were available. The program used commercial language books, developed much of its own instructional material, and used resources provided by a local outreach center. Although the program has been discontinued due to staffing considerations, the school district was satisfied that it helped students develop an interest in languages and provided guidance on learning a language (P. Buckner, personal communication, March 1996).

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Twin Falls School District 411 (Idaho). Three consecutive single-language sessions for eighth graders were undertaken at two junior high schools to boost enrollment in languages and promote the establishment of a German sequential program in the junior high. The program is meant to serve as an overview of languages in general and of French, German, and Spanish specifically. Students first spend two weeks studying linguistics and the nature of language acquisition, then 12 weeks studying one of the above languages. The individual language session concludes with the students giving a cultural talk on one aspect of the language studied. Students then move on to the next language for 12 weeks and conclude with the last of the three languages. Materials used include *Learning About Languages (A Comprehensive FLEX Activity Book)* and the *Exploring French*, *Exploring Spanish*, and *Exploring German* series. The books are used as a framework that is supplemented with a good deal of teacher-developed material. The initial goal of establishing a German course was met. Because the FLEX program is a "broad-brush" approach, there is no real duplication of effort once students are enrolled in one of the year-long language programs (S. Waters, personal communication, March 1996).

Prince George's County Public Schools (Maryland). This school system offers a language potpourri/world language study program at both the elementary and middle school levels. This approach gives all students the opportunity to explore various languages and the cultures of the people who speak them. The course helps students understand how languages are related, with special focus on Latin and the Romance languages. The relationship of English to other languages is studied through roots, prefixes, suffixes, and related and borrowed words. Eight schools participate at Grade 5 (a year-long course); 26 participate at Grade 7 (a semester course). At the end of the course, students are expected to (1) integrate the use of foreign expressions into the cultural situations where these expressions or words are normally used; (2) show how concepts and beliefs are associated with the target languages and the native speakers' day-to-day way of life; and (3) explore the relationship of other languages to English. Students are generally introduced to Spanish, French, Japanese, and Swahili, although some teachers also include German, Russian, or Latin in the curriculum. Special student packets for each language are created by teachers and include critical thinking activities and curriculum indicators. *Exploring Languages*, the *Exploring Spanish* and *Exploring French* series from EMC, and the *Peoples* and *Places* series from Silver Burdett are used in the classroom. Over 5,000 students take the exploratory courses each year, and the program regularly meets its objectives. Through this program, students learn about foreign language study skills and discover which foreign language and culture may interest them for future formal study. At the middle and high school level, students determine a single language to study, choosing Spanish, French, German, Japanese, Italian, Latin, or Russian. Swahili will be offered in the 1996-97 school year (P. Barr-Harrison, personal communication, June 1996).

The Lovett School (Atlanta, GA). This combination general language/potpourri FLEX program was established in Grade 6 to (1) introduce students to different languages and cultures; (2) offer students who had taken French in Grades K-5 an option to study other languages before committing to a two-year study of a foreign language (French, Latin, German, or Spanish) in Grade 7 and 8; (3) accommodate the large number of new students in Grade 6; and (4) provide a foreign language at all grade levels. The program aims to introduce the interrelatedness of languages, foster an appreciation of world cultures, teach a few expressions in other languages, and give an understanding of different forms of communication. A new language is introduced every week and a half. In addition to discussing hieroglyphics, Braille, and signed languages, teachers introduce Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, German, French, Spanish, Hindi, Swahili, and Arabic. Some of these may be omitted; others may be added, depending on student interest and resources. Teachers emphasize that all languages can be interesting and fun to learn. Most program materials were developed by program staff, to be used in conjunction with *Learning About Languages*. *Exploring Languages* is the main resource for teachers. Because the modules are short and flexible, interdisciplinary units can be created or coordinated with other curricula. The program has achieved its goals and is popular with students, teachers, and parents (C. Farmer, personal communication, April 1996).

For More Information

The National FLES* Institute at the University of Maryland at Baltimore, Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics, Baltimore, MD 21228 (310-231-0824) is a good source of information on FLEX programs. For general information on early language programs, contact the National Network for Early Language Learning (NNELL) at the Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd Street NW, Washington, DC 20037 (202-429-9292).

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This report was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Dept. of Education, under contract no. RR93002010. The opinions expressed are not necessarily those of OERI or ED.